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**Guatemala women as refugees. A study of change in  
gender relations in the context of social movements**

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## **Chapter Five:**

### **Gendered Identities**

The changes in social relations discussed in general terms in the two previous chapters will be further explored by looking at how the situation of refuge has affected one specific social relation: gender relations. Gender relations will be used as a case study to reflect on the widespread social changes experienced by the refugee society.

The majority of studies to date that have taken Latin American women as their subjects have focused on writing women's histories from a feminist perspective (Eckstein, 1989; Mohanty, 1991; Smith-Ayala, 1991). Few works have been able to give an account of the distinctive perspective of subalterns on which they concentrate (Nicholson, 1990:6). This chapter will attempt to go beyond looking at women as the alternate others, and instead it will try and explore how social relations today place women in the marginal positions in which they are found. The emphasis will be placed on the constitution of women's identities within the constraints of the social relations in which they develop. Thus, the exploration of the changes in gender relations in the refugee situation will give insight into the ways in which gendered identities are developed, altered, and maintained within a specific society.

#### **1. A Definition of Gender:**

For the purpose of this paper, the term "gender" will encompass not only "women" as it is commonly used in popular literature, but rather both genders- male or female. This precision is necessary to ensure that when we speak of "gender relations" it is clear that this term refers to the culturally defined relations between men and women. Gender relations are both socially and culturally defined. That is, the economic, social and political roles that both women and men play are strongly influenced by the cultural origins of the individuals and the historical context in which these individuals reside.

In the case of the refugee population gender relations are defined by both the Mayan and Hispanic cultural baggage to which the refugees are exposed and by the physical changes of the process of refuge. Furthermore, the individual women themselves affect gender relations to the extent that they accept, reject, and/or change the roles that they perceive they should play in society. Gender roles, in the refugee society are also constructed in a cultural context in which men hold dominant roles and women are encouraged to play marginalized roles.<sup>1</sup> Such marginalization has resulted in the formation of women's identities outside the mainstream political sphere. The redefinition of gender identities that will be discussed in what follows of this chapter never occurs outside the constraints of cultural and social traditions. While women do begin to rethink the roles assigned to them by their gender adscription, they also continue to incorporate the social value systems of their cultural upbringing (Di Stefano, 1990:70-71; Pateman, 1992:19).

## **2. Gendered Identities:**

The formation of gendered identities is expressed in the life stories collected from refugee women through their own evaluations of both the refugee situation and their original Guatemalan societies. The concept of gendered identities recognizes that the narrator's gender is always a defining characteristic of both the narrator's experience and of the forms of narration that she/he chooses (Smith, 1990:145). Gender, like ethnicity discussed in Chapter 3, is a social construction that aids our definitions of the social worlds within which we develop (Nicholson, 1990:45). When looking at the development of gendered consciousness in public discourses like life stories it is necessary to view this process from two separate perspectives.

First, we can explore the development of the self within the narratives of refugee women (Peacock, 1993:368). Representations of the self are constrained in narratives by several factors including the physical context of the interview, the language

barriers and constraints, the relationships between the interviewer and the interviewee and the personal situation that the social actor is undergoing at the time of the interview. In telling a life story the narrator selects and organizes the events in order to present a vision of the self that she wants to put forth (Patai, 1988:9). Working within these constraints, the life story incorporates beliefs, values, ideas and experiences of each individual. Pujadas has called the incorporation of value systems seen in life stories the reflective quality of the biographical method. He is, however, careful to define life stories as opaque reflections of the social relations in which the narrator is situated (Pujadas, 1992:87). Thus, in a narration it is possible to consolidate, legitimize, challenge or simply reflect cultural practices and myths (Smith, 1990:154). As reflections of social relations life stories and the identities that they put forth, are not static portrayals of individuals and their society. Rather, life stories are situated within historical processes (Peacock, 1993:373) of change and they will reflect the dynamic identities of the orators as well as the dynamics of social relations themselves (Nicholson, 1990:40).

### **3. Women and Violence:**

In the Guatemalan case, violence was originally aimed at persons, male or female, who played politically active roles. In its first years the majority of the victims were men. During the period of genocidal violence, little distinction was made between female and male victims. There was, however, a distinction between the type of violence to which women and men were exposed to. While both women and men were burnt or shot to death, women were commonly raped and/or had their reproductive system damaged or destroyed.

In personal interviews that were not recorded, the women interviewed were more willing to speak about the types of violence that they experienced or witnessed. One woman spoke of how she saw the assassination of three women who were washing by the river. One woman was pregnant. She was raped and afterwards her stomach

was cut open and the fetus kicked around on the ground by the soldiers. To kill her a stick was speared through her anus. The two other women were killed in a similar manner after being raped. While this description might seem excessively graphic it does point to the existence of indescribable violence targeted towards women.

In the description of her flight from Guatemala, Doña Olga also presents another form of female-specific violence that affects women in their role as a mothers. The effects of violence on women as mothers has been documented in Argentina's Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo. In the Argentinian case, women experience direct violence without physical harm through the abduction or assassination of their children. Regardless of the lack of physical harm, violence aimed at their children is felt by the women themselves as one of the worst forms of state-sponsored violence. (Comisión Nacional Sobre la Desaparición, 1986:302)

For Doña Olga, the violence against her unborn child is what encourages her current political activity in the return process.

"El ejército llegó esa tarde ametrallado y quemando las casas y los animales. Yo estaba lavando en un río cuando llegó mi esposo. Yo veía una tronazón por allá. Pero yo pensaba que era un cumpleaños y que estaban quemando cuetillos. Y que cuetillos! El ejército había avanzado al pueblo. Llegó mi esposo y me dijo,

'Olga, el ejército ya entró.'  
'No esas son mentiras', le dije- yo no lo creía.

'Salgamos', me dijo.

'Y los patojos?'

'Ya se fueron adelante a esconderse a una cueva.'

Pues, el me esperó porque yo estaba embarazada. Tenía cinco meses de embarazo. Salimos de la casa y nos fuimos para la montaña. Pero como en la

"The army came that afternoon and killed people with a machine gun. They burnt the houses and the animals. I was washing in the river when my husband came. I heard some thunder over that way. I thought that it was a birthday and that they were setting off fire crackers. And what fire crackers! The army had gone into the town. My husband came and he said:

'Olga, Olga the army came'

'No, that's a lie', I said. I didn't believe it.

'Lets get out', he said.

'And the kids?'

'They went ahead to hide in a cave'

He waited for me because I was five months pregnant. We left the house and went into the mountain. But in the mountains

montaña hay muchos caminos para las parcelas mi esposo agarró uno y yo otro y me perdió como a las cinco de la tarde. Me quede atrancada en un árbol. Ni dormí. Al otro día fui a buscar gente, nada. Cuando sentí ahí estaba el ejército. Cuatro soldados con las armas y mirando. Lo que hice fue sentarme entre unas matas de cardamomo. Y pasaron. Después seguí caminando. A los doce días de que andaba caminado me caí. Me fui al potrero de mi tío. Y allí estaban los soldados durmiendo en hamacas. Llegue cerquitita como a tres metros y sentí un olor a un cigarro- estaba el ejército durmiendo en hamacas. Me fui y no me escucharon y como iba para atrás me deslicé y caí como 3 metros. Caí sentada. Al otro día aborte a mi niño varón. Yo he sufrido. Yo miraba unas nubes. Me acosté debajo de una cueva y sangraba. Y encontré dos pedazos de aspirina en la bata que llevaba y los tome y se me aclaró la vista. Pero enterré mi hijo y yo pienso que cuando regrese a Guatemala voy a encontrar a mi hijo porque no se me olvida donde lo enterré. Eso fue a los 12 días de estar perdida. A los 17 días me encontré mi familia." -Doña Olga.

there are many paths that go to different plots and my husband took one path and I took an other and I got lost at about five in the evening. I got stuck in a tree and I fell asleep. The next day I went to look for people and I didn't find anyone. Before I knew it the army was there. Four soldiers with their weapons looking. What I did was sit in some cardamom plants. They went by. After that I continued to walk. After walking for 12 days I fell. I went to my uncle's stables. There were soldiers there sleeping in hammocks. I came close, about 3 meters and I smelt cigarette smoke. The army was sleeping in hammocks. I left and they didn't hear me. I was walking backwards so I fell about three meters. I landed on my behind. A day later I aborted my son. I have suffered. I saw clouds. I lay down near a cave and I bled. I found two pieces of aspirin that I had in my dress and I ate them and my vision got better. But, I buried my son and I think that when I go back to Guatemala, I am going to find my son because I can never forget where I buried him. That was when I had been lost for twelve days. My family found me after 17 days." -Doña Olga.

Although Doña Olga's experience is not as direct an assault on the person as was the previous example, it does show the range of effects that the experience with violence has on the female body and psyche. While the loss of her child was not caused directly by

an army action, Doña Olga does blame the army for his death and her mental anguish. Doña Olga's participation in the community today as a health promoter is aimed at ensuring a safe return to Guatemala. For her, it is the image of her dead son and the desire to give a value to his death that pushes her to continue participating.

The violence perpetrated against women is characterized by the intensity of its unmentionable quality. This makes the collection of female-specific violent experiences very difficult. Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind throughout the rest of this chapter that women were irrevocally affected by the violence to which they were exposed and by the subsequent effects of violence.

#### **4. The Space of Refuge:**

Upon arrival in the Mexican refugee camps many of the exiles were sick, in the last stages of starvation, and with the emotional problems that accompany the loss of family, friends and country. As refugees, it was no longer possible to sustain the way of life that many of indigenous peasants were accustomed to. The arrangement of social reproduction through agricultural production was impossible in the context of most refugee camps.

Most of the relocated camps in Campeche and Quintana Roo provide some degree of access to arable land for its residents thus allowing men to participate as providers of sustenance once again. In the camps in Chiapas, access to land is less stable. In some Chiapas camps the residents are not given any access to arable land and are still supported on the most part by donations from governmental and non-governmental agencies. Some of the residents, however, are able to rent nearby land or to hire out their labour as agriculturalists to neighbouring Mexican peasants. In these situations, women's work as cooks and distributors of food makes them into the providers of subsistence.

During the first two years of refuge physical survival was



not assured as the refugee camps swelled with new victims and disease spread in the malnourished populations. Particularly in the beginning, there was little material help to care for the sick and the malnourished. In this situation of precarious survival, the sustenance of family units took on a different meaning. For the recent arrivals it was difficult to establish work or access to land so that they could earn a living. Sustenance in this stage was only attained through donations by non-governmental organizations particularly the Catholic Church and the Dioceses of San Cristobal.

The change in gender relations began as a result of the irreparable breaches in the social situation of refuge discussed in previous chapters. The participation of women in communal projects not specifically addressing women's issues impelled a rethinking of gender roles. Changes in gendered identities do not only affect gender relations. Moreover, the rethinking of gendered identities has affected the refugees' overall conceptions of the self. Changes in gender relations, discussed below, can be attributed to two factors: a change in the peasant way of life and a cosmopolitization of the refugees outlook.

##### **5. Economic Indicators:**

The most notable change in gender roles was the overturning of male predominance in the provision of family sustenance through agricultural products for consumption and sale. Camp life made it very difficult for men to be able to continue working as agriculturalists in order to sustain their families. At the same time, women began to play a very important role as mediators between non-governmental aid and their communities. Material aid projects such as health promotion and disease prevention, hygiene promotion, and cooking brigades, all utilized women's labour to distribute aid.

In the joint interview with Doña Lucía and Doña Cristina, both women explain their role as community cooks in the first

refugee camps. As food was donated to the refugees groups, women became responsible for its distribution and preparation. Thus, women played the only possible role in the control of subsistence in the early refugee context.

*"Doña Lucia:* Así fue como nos empezamos a reunir con nuestras compañeras- porque tuvimos que hacer cocina para los niños. Teníamos un comedorón grande para niños y embarazadas y desnutridos.

*Doña Cristina:* A las siete de la mañana ya estaba uno cocinando....

*Doña Lucia:* Para eso a mi me tocó empezar a reunirme con mis compañeras pero como yo no tenía esa costumbre yo temblaba pero le hacia lo posible de hablar ahí con las compañeras y en eso formamos otro comité ya de compañeras mujeres para que estas compañeras me ayudaran a lidear con la demás gente que sola yo no me sentía capaz.

*Doña Cristina:* Habían bastante gente. Diario pasaban cuatrocientas gentes al comedor. Después la venida para acá.

*Doña Lucia:* Ya nos dijeron que nos teníamos que ir para Campeche mucha gente no se quería venir para acá. Pero como era forzosamente la venida para acá con los soldados de la marina. Entonces ya nos tocó hacer un comedor aquí abajo en la orilla del río en Pico de Oro para que la gente que venía teníamos que darles de comer por dos semanas. Cuando salió la ultima gente ya nos sacaron para acá." -Doña Cristina y Doña Lucia.

*"Doña Lucia:* That was how we began to meet with our other compañeras because we had to cook for the children. We had a large lunch room for the children, the pregnant women and malnourished people.

*Doña Cristina:* We were cooking by seven in the morning.

*Doña Lucia:* To be able to do that I had to begin to meet with my compañeras but because I wasn't used to speaking I would shake but I made an effort to talk to the compañeras. After that we formed another committee of women so that those compañeras could help me to deal with all the people because I didn't feel capable of doing it on my own.

*Doña Cristina:* There were a lot of people. Each day there were four hundred people in the lunch room and after that we came here.

*Doña Lucia:* They told us that we had to go to Campeche here. Many people didn't want to come here. But, it was forced on us by marine soldiers. Then, we had to make a big lunch room down there at the edge of the river in Pico de Oro so that we could feed the people that were arriving for two weeks. When the last people left they brought us here too." -Doña Cristina and Doña Lucia.

For Doña Lucia it was this newly acquired responsibility which allowed for the first organizations of women and encouraged women themselves to begin to speak in public.

Doña Lucia also details in her account a characterization of female leadership in the refugee situation. First, the participation of women responded directly to specific and immediate survival necessities. Second, women's participation followed traditionally accepted gender activities. Thus, it was not necessarily women's participation per se which became more important, but rather women's work which gained influence with the inability of men to provide subsistence. Finally, women's leadership was not concentrated in one individual but rather in a group of women that together enabled the management of basic needs projects.

The role of women's work retained its prevalence throughout the first four to five years of the instability of the refugee situation and, thus, allowed women to gain confidence in their productive roles in their community.

Even in the relocated camps women's work continues to play a leading role in family subsistence. Female contribution to the household economy in the Campeche camp of Quetzal Edzná can be seen in two ways. First, women add cash to the household by participating in income supplementing projects. One such project is the raising of patio animals such as pigs, turkeys, rabbits and chickens. Raising these animals has been encouraged by non-governmental agencies that provided the start up costs for communal raising of patio animals. Additionally, these agencies have given participating women the training needed to successfully maintain and reproduce these animals.

A second example of income supplementing activities are sewing and design projects where women receive training to be able to use electric sewing machines and the instruction needed to design dress pieces. With such training women can create pieces

for sale within and out of the community or they can choose to participate hiring out their labour for piece work on contracts awarded to refugee community workshops. In both cases the training allows women to contribute much needed cash income to the family. Where as in the second type of projects women receive cash income directly, in the first example men usually acquire the cash for women's animals by selling these outside of the refugee community and giving women only part of the profits that are derived from the sale of the animals.

A second way that women contribute to the household economy is by hiring out their labour as domestic servants in the urban centres near the camp.<sup>2</sup> Although women have not traditionally sought paid work outside of the refugee camps, it seems that recently the number of domestic servants has increased as men's wages for unskilled labour have fallen far below the potential earnings for female domestic servants. It was estimated by the interviewees that the monthly salary for a construction assistant, the most common position for unskilled male refugees, was between 100 and 120 new Pesos in October of 1994.<sup>3</sup> From these gross earnings the worker had to deduct the costs of food, shelter and transportation while living in the city which resulted in a net income of approximately 60 new Pesos. In contrast, female domestic servants earned between 90 and 100 new Pesos<sup>4</sup> from which only minimal deductions for transportation were necessary. Thus, women's potential earnings were approximately 50% higher than men's unskilled labour.

While this relatively large differential in income between women and men does not have notable effects on the older populations it has resulted in changes in the attitudes held by young refugee women. As young women realize their earning potential, they are more willing to remain independent and contribute to their initial nuclear family rather than seek marriage at an early age. Sofia, a fifteen year old woman, explained that if she married someone she would not be able to

continue earning a living and her husband would not be able to provide for her in the level to which she was now accustomed. She preferred the financial and social independence that she could reach by working part of the year outside of the camp, to the marriage situation in which many of her peers were involved.

The restructuring of economic activities that occurred in exile had two important effects. First, the situation of refuge gave importance to traditional women's work. In giving value to women's tasks it allowed refugee women to revalorize their productive roles in both the private and public spheres. Second, the economic changes in exile have caused a breach between the older and the younger generations of women who can foresee economic independence without male help. While these changes may not endure outside the context of the refugee camps they will have a long lasting effect on the ways in which women view themselves and their potential roles in society.

#### **6. Political Participation- The Dissolution of Authority:**

The nascent participation of women in the political organization of the refugee community is perceived by many of the women interviewed as a radical change in their societies. This view is held by the interviewees despite the fact that by their own estimates no more than 20% of the female refugee population are active political participants. According to Catalina, it is precisely the cultural constraints that have limited women's participation in the past and in the present.

"Yo te digo que en la cuestión cultural y en la cuestión ideológica y el sistema en que hemos vivido ha impedido que la mujer tenga una libertad para participar. Hay frenos. Son pocos los espacios conquistados por la mujer. Realmente han sido mínimos. En mi caso yo tengo muchos años de estar aquí. Mi compañero es super claro de este proceso

"I will tell you that both the cultural system and the ideological system in which we have lived has stopped women from participating freely. There are brakes. There are only a few spaces that women have been able to conquer. They are minimal spaces. In my case I have been here for many years. My compañero is very aware of this process but

pero tengo ciertas limitaciones y es un reto de la propia mujer de conquistar sus espacios dentro el seno de la familia a exigir su reconocimiento dentro de otros organismos."-Catalina

still I have some limitations and it is a big challenge for women themselves to conquer the space in the very heart of their family so that they then can go out and demand their place in other organizations."-Catalina.

Catalina places the root of impediments for women's participation in the heart of the family structure and in particular in her personal relationship with her husband. For her, it is only through changes within the home that women can even begin to conquer spaces in the general society. The interviewees stressed that female participation depends strongly on male approval. This emphasis alludes to the dominant role that men continue to play within the refugee society. While Catalina stresses that there is a resistance from men to women's political participation, she also stresses that both men and women must participate in changing their attitudes and perspectives to attain changes in gender relations. For her, women's political participation outside the home sphere requires two parties. This is a particularly relevant point in view of popular feminist studies that try to analyze societal phenomena by restricting their vision to women's spheres without taking into account their male counterparts.

Nevertheless, there is evidence of a process of consciousness building that has happened within the existing women's groups. The realization that social injustices have taken place in Guatemala has led some refugee women to look inward into their own personal situations and question the social injustices in the gender relations with which they have grown up.

Schirmer in *Seeking Truth and Gendering Consciousness* details how the participation of Guatemalan women in the CONAVIGUA union of widows leads to a rethinking of familial gender relations (1993:63). For Schirmer, gendering consciousness occurs at the point in which the state can no longer be trusted to set laws and boundaries of behaviour (Radcliffe, 1993:62). The process of

gendering consciousness for refugee women parallels the CONAVIGUA case study. As with the process of rethinking ethnicity discussed in the previous chapter, women begin to question their prescribed gender roles when the experience of refuge has forced a rethinking of their overall role in society.

"Como te digo uno realmente la consciencia la va adquiriendo en todo su sufrimiento y en medio de todas las problemáticas uno ya no puede cerrar los ojos ante esa injusticia y uno dice bueno aquí hay que hacer muchas cosas". -Catalina

"As I've told you you acquire a conscience in all the suffering and through all the problems to which you are a witness. It becomes impossible to close your eyes in front of injustice and one has to say: 'Well, there are a lot of things that have to be done here.'" -Catalina

For Catalina the realization of injustice is what led her into political action. The movement towards action begins at the point when her eyes can no longer be closed. Refugee women have reached this point not only with regards to the political situation in Guatemala but also with regards to the constraints placed upon them by their culture and the refugee camp society.

Doña Olga's account below gives us a very critical vision of Guatemalan indigenous society's treatment of women. Her perspective is not unique although her position is exceptional in that she had received medical training before leaving Guatemala.<sup>5</sup>

"Algunas personas tenían más apertura en muchos aprendizajes. Así como yo allá estude medicina. Para enfermería y yo ya traía un principio para acá.... Allá en Guatemala no había participación de la mujer. Yo veía con mi mamá. A mi papá no le gustaba que mi mamá saliera a pasear sola. De salir los dos así con los hijos. Pero si mi mamá salía sola le ponía horas. "Allá corriendito vienes para acá."

"Some people had more opportunities to learn many things. Like me, I studied medicine in Guatemala. I already had the basics of nursing before I came to Mexico... In Guatemala women did not participate. I saw it with my mother. My father didn't like my mother to walk around alone. If they did go it would have to be the both of them with their children. And if my mom did go out alone he would limit her time. "Go

Eso yo lo veía muy triste.... Mas mujeres yo veía a lavar la ropa al arroyo y corriendo a la casa a seguir trabajando. Una mujer nunca iba a una fiesta. El hombre sí hacía lo que quería- en el baile, chupaba su trago, bailaba y llegaba él borracho a darle bofetadas. La participación de la mujer era trabajar de noche en la mañana. Esa era la participación de la mujer. Todo esto también ahora nos hizo reaccionar. Ahora dicen algunas compañeras: tenemos el mismo cuerpo pero no los mismos pensamientos. Algunas mujeres ahora dicen yo quiero participar."- Dona Olga.

there quickly and come back here".

I thought that was very sad... I saw many women wash clothes in the river and run back home to continue working. A woman never went to a party. The man did what he wanted. He went to parties, he drank, danced and came home drunk to hit his wife. Women's participation was to work everyday from dawn until night. That was women's participation. All of this has also made us react. That is what some compañeras say. We now have the same body but different thoughts. Now some women are saying I want to participate." -Doña Olga.

Doña Olga describes the situation for women in her home town. She is clear, however in highlighting that there is more than one type contribution that women make to the community. In Guatemala women participated in the home and they were limited to that context. In the refugee situation, women's participation takes on a different meaning and denotes political action outside the home, thus breaking in part the traditional sphere of male dominance.

Another characteristic of women's participation in the refugee context is an increased involvement of indigenous women despite difficulties with the Spanish language. Eighty percent of the women leaders interviewed were of indigenous origin. Additionally, the international representative of the CCPP for the Vertiente Norte is an indigenous woman whose educational level is lower than the third primary school year. The high percentage of indigenous participants, particularly women, at high levels of responsibility is an important change within the structures of Guatemalan society. As such, the conclusion of this section will attempt to describe how this change has occurred and how it has been reinforced in the refugee communities.



## 7. Ethnicity and Women's Participation:

The process of **castellanización** discussed in chapter 2 also contributed to the increased participation of indigenous women in refugee political organizations. In the multicultural conditions of the refugee camps, Spanish became the lingua franca. Learning Spanish became for some of the indigenous women interviewed a liberating action that allowed them to extend themselves beyond their immediate families and ethnic groups. Speaking and understanding Spanish, in addition to encouraging the participation of indigenous women outside the immediate circles, also gave these women access to information and community supports that were previously denied to them. With knowledge of Spanish women were able to access training programmes offered by governmental and non-governmental organizations. Additionally, women were also able to become literate in special programmes sponsored by non-governmental organizations in the camps.

The education and increased literacy that was acquired by many refugees in exile through training programmes is highlighted by Doña Olga as one of the most important factors leading towards an advancement in the situation for women.

"En Guatemala ahí crecía el pueblo pero en la misma idea todos y no había un estiramiento de pensamiento que alcanzara a pensar en algún estudio en algo. En cambio acá en México acá es diferente. Aquí hay estudio hasta las viejitas sí les gusta. ¿Cuando en Guatemala había alfabetización para los adultos? Allá no había. Ese es un avance que la gente lleva. Las señoras que venían de allá que venían como de treinta años, no sabían ni como se

"In Guatemala the people grew but all of them with the same ideas and there was no stretching the their thoughts so that you could begin to think about studying something. Here in Mexico thing are different. Here there is studying and even the old ladies like it. When were there literacy classes for adults in Guatemala? There were none in Guatemala. That is the advance that people are taking with them. The women who came here and who were

llamaban ni cual era la primera letra de su nombre. Ahora son mujeres que son coordinadoras que ya saben firmar y apuntar algo. Aquí ha habido un avance. Es como se aprenden las cosas de ver como otras compañeras lo están haciendo."- Doña Olga.

around thirty years old when they got here did not even know what their name was or what was the first letter of their name. Now these women are coordinators and they know how to sign their name and make notes. Here there has been an advance. And, that is how others begin to do things by seeing other compañeras do it too." -Doña Olga.

According to Doña Olga, the period of exile has changed not only women's situation but also women's self perceptions. She thinks that in exile, women of all ages value education and use it to advance both their own persons and their society. Yet, it is also evident that for Doña Olga, the process of education alone is not solely responsible for the advancement of women's situation. For her, it is the example that women give to each other that allows for the strength needed to participate. Here Doña Olga raises the importance of collective action to foster women's participation.

In the passage that follows, Catalina explains how the cultural structures that maintain male domination in Guatemalan society attain its goals by limiting the lack of educational opportunities open to women.

"Te diré que tampoco no tuve mucho estudio tuve oportunidad de tener beca de una iglesia católica pero no tuve la oportunidad porque mi padre también no se preocupó. También la cultura- la ideología de decir a la mujer para qué le va servir la educación si sólo tiene destino de ser madre y el varón si porque él tiene responsabilidades hacia la

"I'll tell you that I wasn't able to study a lot. I had the opportunity to have a scholarship from the catholic church but I wasn't able to take it because my dad did not care. It is also the culture. Our ideology says that education will be useless for women if their only destiny is to be a mother. The situation with the man is different because he will have

mujer. Esos desniveles que hay en la cultura."-Catalina.

responsibilities to fulfil towards the woman. There are those inequalities in the culture." -Catalina.

For both Catalina and Doña Olga, education is something that was culturally denied and not a necessary result of economic inequality. For Catalina, an indigenous woman, it is her culture's ideology that places unequal limitations on women. Yet, Catalina's narration concentrates on her own experience from which she derives a critical view of her own society. Thus, she does not blame her father alone for her lack of educational opportunity, but her culture for endorsing values that deprecate women.

#### **8. External Influences:**

The participation of women in refugee organizations has been deeply influenced by the presence of governmental and non-governmental organizations. These organizations have helped to determine, not only the extent, but the character of women's participation in refugee communities through their material aid and literacy programmes. COMAR, the Mexican Commission to Aid Refugees is the most important governmental organization in the refugee camps throughout Mexico. It is a Mexican government institution, based in Tuxtla Gutierrez, Chiapas, through which much of the United Nations aid programmes are administered. COMAR implements a variety of programmes including the provision of agricultural credits, sewing and design workshops, and food payments to non-accredited primary school instructors.

In the states of Campeche and Chiapas, COMADEP, a consortium of non-governmental Mexican and international development aid organizations, is one of the most influential organizations. COMADEP has been responsible for financing training workshops on women's and Human Rights issues as well as technical publishing training for young refugees.

A final important and long standing organizational actor in the refugee context is the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church has aided the refugees from the outset with the provision of basic subsistence needs, health promotion projects, and educational training for catechists. These three key organizations have set the tone for the participation of refugee women throughout Mexico and specifically in the refugee camp of Quetzal Edzná.

Although most of the projects mentioned above, with the exception of COMADEP's women's workshops, do not address women's issues specifically, they have provided a space for refugee women to acquire skills and to loose their inhibitions and begin to participate in wider community networks. It would seem to be coincidence rather than explicit plans on the part of the aid organizations that women's participation and empowerment has resulted from their projects. In general, most projects did not aim to aid women specifically but rather to provide aid to the entire community or household. Yet, the areas where aid organizations could be of help were also those that had been traditionally assigned to the private domain of the Guatemalan peasant woman.<sup>6</sup>

The passage that follows gives us a clear example of the unplanned results of development projects.

"En un momento yo quise capacitarme en corte y confección y COMAR nos dió unas máquinas. Trabajamos aquí en el campamento por dos años. Pero llegó un momento en que dijeron:

'Estas máquinas se van a ir para el otro campamento porque Uds. no se quieren ir para allá. Entonces estas máquinas se van.'

Pero no tomaron en cuenta a las mujeres en los convenios que hicieron entre COMAR y los representantes generales de

"At one time I wanted to receive training in sewing and COMAR gave us some sewing machines. We worked here in the camp for two years but one day they said:

'These machines are going to go to the other camp because you don't want to go there to live. So, these machines are going there.'

But, they didn't take into account the women in the arrangements that were made between COMAR and the general representatives of the

los refugiados y ahí se fue todo. Para acabar de arreglar la cosa, mi esposo estaba de representante general. En la tarde cuando ya las máquinas estaban entregadas llego y me dijo:

'Mira las máquinas se van a ir para tal campamento'

'Hay, así de fácil?', le dije yo.

'Si'

'Pues, no. ¿Y porqué no nos tomaron en cuenta a nosotros?'

'Porque, como Uds. no dicen nada'

Y entonces nosotros ya dijimos: 'entonces de veras que a nosotros no nos toman en cuenta, pues'. Y empezamos a ver de que nunca íbamos a salir de eso si no nos organizábamos."- Doña Iliana

refugees and so we lost everything. To top it all off, my husband was the general representative. In the

afternoon when the machines had already been turned over he came and told me:

'Look the machines are going to go to that camp'

'Oh, that easy?', I said to him.

'Yes'

'Well, no. And why didn't you take us into account?'

'Because, well you never say anything.'

And so we said that it was true that we weren't taken into account. And we began to notice that we would never be able to overcome that if we did not become organized." - Doña Iliana.

By losing her work in a women's sewing project Doña Iliana realizes the inherent inequalities towards women in her society. In reacting to her job loss Doña Iliana not only criticises her own society, but reacts against it by becoming involved in a women's organization. Doña Iliana defines the need to participate politically as a woman as the need to have her voice heard within her society.

Women's participation in community struggles begins the gendering of their consciousness. That is, women become politically aware as both social actors and, subsequently, as female social actors. Throughout this chapter it has been possible to detail the process of gendering consciousness which begins with the violence in Guatemala and is cemented in the process of refuge. The process of change in gender relations is in many ways similar to changes that have occurred in the refugee's self perception of ethnicity. These similarities are not coincidental. Rather, both ethnicity and gender have been affected by the

overwealming consequences of Guatemala's Massacres in the Jungle.

What is striking about the rethinking of gender and ethnicity is the increased empowerment of social actors. In gaining a political role in the refugee society women feel that they have greater control over their lives and improved technical and oratory abilities. These perceived improvements are radical departures from the refugee women's account of their original self-perception- "No eramos nada", or "el pobre no vale nada".<sup>7</sup> Whether these changes endure the return and resettlement in Guatemala remains to be seen. What is certain, however, is that the period of refuge did not serve to suffocate and subjugate the population. Rather, refuge provided the peasant population with an opportunity to become literate, and learn both about their world and about themselves. The result of refuge is, in part, the empowerment of a new community. Thus, Guatemala's harvest of violence also harvested the unexpected seeds of reform.

Endnotes for Chapter 5:

The refugee community is mostly made up of indigenous peasants. The gender roles discussed, however, are those which are familiar in the mestizo societies in which they live. For instance, there is a generalized absence of female leadership in organizations such as the permanent commissions. The most overt form of women's participation in the community is in minor roles in community-wide organizations and as parts of women's based organizations.

Women interviewed detailed their work as domestics in the cities of Campeche, Yucotón, Merida and even Cancun.

Approximately between 33 and 40 US dollars per month at the exchange rate prevalent in October 1994.

Approximately 30 to 33 US dollars at the prevalent exchange rate in October 1994.

Of more than 20 women leaders interviewed only two had received any formal training prior to leaving Guatemala. One woman, Doña Olga had been trained as a financial assistant and another, Catalina, had been trained as a catechist.

Women were traditionally assigned to cooking in the home, raising of small animals and looking after her family's health. Many of the aid organizations' programs addressed these specific areas. The Catholic Church, for instance, provided refugees with food that they could then prepare for the whole community. COMAR also provided aid for the improvement of health conditions in the camps and training opportunities given to groups of women.

They were not important", or "The poor have no worth".

## Chapter Six:

### Conclusions

Throughout the extent of this essay individual life stories told by Guatemalan refugee women have been the focus from which knowledge of the refugee experience and of refugee identities has been extracted. Life stories are not only seen as illustrations of change, but also as indicators of the continuously dynamic processes of social change. This analytical vantage point is unique in the literature pertaining to Guatemalan refugees. Its advantage lies in allowing the researcher insight not only to the external effects of historical events, but also to the mediation between individuals and communities and the historical events that affect them.

The effects of state-sponsored violence on refugee populations were unexpected results of the attempted ethnocide perpetrated by the Guatemalan Government in the early 1980s. In looking at their memories of violence, Guatemalan women describe the process through which the negative traditions are embraced by individual refugees and the community alike. The promise that the violence experienced in the 1980s will never happen again is the prime motivator for women's participation in the community and for the establishment of many refugee organizations.

In looking at the past, refugee women have found a source of empowerment in the present that is evidenced in the rethinking of both gender and ethnic identities. In participating in small community struggles in exile women began the process of becoming politically aware both as social actors and more specifically as female social actors. The gains of women in becoming political actors are direct results of the process of refuge that allowed for increases in literacy, the use of Spanish as a lingua franca, and the initial thrust of women into recognized economic roles.



Looking at themselves as political actors is perceived by refugee women as an improvement that allows them to move from being "nothing" to active community leaders with a role in decision-making.

While the changes in gender identities in are evident the process of change is not as easily defined. In an effort to look at the processes of change this paper has explored women's own perceptions of the restrictions placed upon change. Cultural constrains are put forth by women as one of the main barriers to their participation. Despite the fact that women view their hispanic and indigenous cultural heritage as a barrier to their empowerment, none of the women interviewed advocated for a departure from their traditions. In analyzing the redefinition of identities, refugee women incorporate multiple facets into their new selves. While parts of their cultural traditions are maintained, other aspects of those traditions are altered.

Ethnic identities have undergone a similar process of change as it is evidenced in the life stories of refugee women. In looking at the causes of violent war, indigenous refugees have rejected the role of the state as the authority. The historical power of the Guatemalan authorities to dictate the roles played by indigenous peoples is now actively challenged by refugees. In public political struggles the refugee leadership continues to challenge the authorship of ethnic spaces and identities. Beyond the empowerment of refugees to define their own ethnicity, ethnic identities have also undergone other radical changes.

Ethnic ascription in the refugee context has been transferred from the local linguistic-cultural base of the individuals into a broad indigenous-Mayan identity. Through life in multiethnic camps refugees have gained an understanding of the shared history of indigenous groups as marginal actors within Guatemala. Joining

individual local identities into the Mayan label is an act of resistance that allows refugee groups greater strength in their political struggles with Guatemalan authorities.

The process of ascription to the Mayan label is noteworthy in its inclusiveness of varied cultural and linguistic forms. To be Mayan for refugee women is to have shared a common history of marginalization and violence in the past but also to currently share a common outlook on the future. The new Mayan identity is most prominent in the plans to return to Guatemala as multiethnic indigenous communities. In planning their future refugees are still Kanjobales, K'eqchi', or Quiche, but they are now also Mayan with inherent common rights to land and political authorship.

The processes of change of ethnic and gender identities discussed above are of particular relevance not only because of their importance to the individual women interviewed or to the refugee community in general. In rethinking gender and ethnic identities and incorporating these changes into the returnee communities Guatemalan refugees have been empowered beyond their local impact. Upon the reinsertion of refugees in Guatemala the lessons of exile will impact the whole of Guatemalan society.

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